

# SYRIAN CIRCASSIANS

## SURIYE ÇERKESLERİ

المواطنون الشركس في سوريا

CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES  
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ

مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية



# SYRIAN CIRCASSIANS

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المواطنون الشركس في سوريا

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# STRATEGIC INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND INDEPENDENT THOUGHT PRODUCTION

## CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

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### **History**

*In Turkey, the shortage of research on the Middle East grew more conspicuous than ever during the early 90's. Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) was established in January 1, 2009 in order to provide relevant information to the general public and to the foreign policy community. The institute underwent an intensive structuring process, beginning to concentrate exclusively on Middle affairs.*

### **Outlook on the Middle Eastern World**

*It is certain that the Middle East harbors a variety of interconnected problems. However, neither the Middle East nor its people ought to be stigmatized by images with negative connotations. Given the strength of their populations, Middle Eastern states possess the potential to activate their inner dynamics in order to begin peaceful mobilizations for development. Respect for people's willingness to live together, respect for the sovereign right of states and respect for basic human rights and individual freedoms are the prerequisites for assuring peace and tranquility, both domestically and internationally. In this context, Turkey must continue to make constructive contributions to the establishment of regional stability and prosperity in its vicinity.*

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### **Prof. Dr. Anzor Kushabiyev**

He is the Head of the Department of Information and Document Management at the Institute of Social Research within Kabardino-Balkarian Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

### **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Naima Neflyasheva**

Naima Neflyasheva was born in Maykop, capital of the Republic of Adygea affiliated to the Russian Federation. Graduated from St. Petersburg State University, Neflyasheva is Associate Professor of History. She works as a senior scholar at the Center for Civilizational and Regional Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Her scientific areas of interest are listed as follows: Islamic History in Northwestern Caucasus, Current Islam in Caucasus, "Circassian problem". She has more than 100 studies published in the Russian Federation as well as in foreign scientific publications. She runs a blog entitled "Severnıy Kavkaz skvoz stoletiya" (North Caucasus Through Centuries) on a website called "Kavkazski Uzel".

### **Murat Topçu**

He graduated from department of Russian Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Istanbul University. He is doing his doctorate in the same department. He has carried out studies and translated works on Russian language and literature, Caucasian history, ethnography, languages and politics. His various articles were published in Atlas Magazine. Some of his published translations can be listed as follows: "Vatanından Uzaklara Çerkesler", *Editor*, Chiviyazıları, İstanbul 2004. "Hedefini Kendi Bulan Nart Tlepş'in Oku" (Stories), Asker Hadağatle, KAFAV, Ankara 2005. "Kafkasya–Dağlı Halkların Göçü ve Kısa Tarihi", Adolf Berje, Chiviyazıları, İstanbul, 2010.

### **Oytun Orhan**

Completing his undergraduate education in Gazi University F.E.A.S. Department of International Relations, Orhan did his master's degree in Hacettepe University Department of International Relations by writing his thesis entitled, "Identity's Effect on Syria's Regional Policies (1946-2000)". Orhan still continues his doctorate studies in Abant İzzet Baysal University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of International Relations. Working as an expert within the Middle East Research Programme of the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM) between the years 1999-2009, Oytun Orhan has been working as a researcher in the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORS-AM) since 2009.

## PRESENTATION

The events in Syria have increasingly been going on since March 2011. The world is striving to find a solution for Syrian crisis. Nevertheless, unfortunately nobody has a solution offer with high chance of success and with definite instruments. Ethnic and sectarian splits constitute one of the most important aspects of the conflict.

The extension of the instability in Syria over a long period of time and a wide area scares most the minorities. The minorities think that they are open to attack and that they cannot protect themselves. Besides, the experiences taking place in the Middle Eastern countries hit by the wave of uprising increase the concerns. Therefore, minorities try not to take sides in the conflict taking place in Syria.

Another community which is concerned about the developments in Syria is the Syrian Circassians. According to various information, currently there are 90 thousand to 100 thousand Circassians, most of whom live in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs in Syria. Circassians arrived in Syria during the first half of the 19th century as they were exiled in the aftermath of the Great Caucasian War, during the mid-1860s as a part of the settlement process of Circassians in the Ottoman Empire. The Circassian immigration into current Syrian territories continued until the beginning of 1920s. Having an effective position in social, cultural and political life of Syria in the past, Circassians are currently an important component of the Syrian society as well. However, due to the recent developments, certain Syrian Circassians applied for the Russian Federation to help them return to their historical homeland as Syria is on the verge of a civil war. As from early 2012, Syrian Circassians started to settle in the Republics of Adygea, Kabardino-Balkar and Karachay-Cherkessia located in Northwestern Caucasus in the Russian Federation; in Reyhanlı district of Hatay and İstanbul in Turkey; in Lebanon; in Jordan; and in Dubai in United Arab Emirates.

We hope that the conflicts in Syria come to an end with minimum loss as soon as possible. Hopefully the ancient communities of Syria live together in peace also in the future just like in the past. So that Syrian Circassians do not have to leave their country, of which they have become a part, for a long period of time. We hope that this study we prepared as ORSAM be considered as a reference on Syrian Circassians and contribute to the formation of a public opinion on this subject in Turkey. We extend our thanks to those who contributed to preparation of this study.

*Hasan Kanbolat*  
*ORSAM Director*

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**By:** Prof. Dr. Anzor Kushabiyev  
 Dr. Naima Neflasheva  
 Murat Topçu  
 Oytun Orhan, ORSAM Middle East Specialist

## SYRIAN CIRCASSIANS

### Abstract

*Circassians came to Syria in mid-1860s due to the fact that they were exiled during and after the Caucasus-Russian War as well as due to the settlement policy of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman administration had several goals in creating Circassian settlements here. The administration made use of the uncultivated lands with Circassians, who had higher agricultural techniques compared to the local people. The Ottoman Empire benefited from Circassians, who had strong military tradition, against the rising independence movements of Druses who posed a problem for İstanbul. The number of Muslim population within the Ottoman Empire increased due to Circassians. Circassians were settled in places near the Hejaz railway route planned to be constructed, and thus the security of the railway was strived to be provided. For similar reasons, Circassians were settled in the areas with stream beds such as the Golan Heights, and thus these areas were secured.*

*The settlement of Circassians into Syria took place in two stages: Directly from North Caucasus, and from Balkans. In mid-1860s one of the first groups arriving from North Caucasus were settled in northern Syria, in Marash sanjak, and they were charged with 'surveilling' the Zeytun district where Armenians lived. Afterwards, in 1872 approximately a thousand Circassians were settled in the neighborhood of Hama and Homs, as well as in the Golan Heights within the borders of the Sanjak of Hauran.*

*The Circassian immigration from the North Caucasus into Syria continued until the early 1920s if at a small scale. Circassians were mostly settled in the Golan Heights, Transjordan, Hama, Homs and Aleppo. The villages such as Amman, Jerash, Kuneitra and Mumbuc they created grew bigger and turned into cities in time. The last group of Circassian immigrants arrived after the World War II.*

*Today, there are 90 thousand to 100 thousand Circassians, most of whom live in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs in Syria. The Circassian people are a part of the Syrian society. Until recently the traditional occupation of Circassians was military service. Both during the Ottoman period and French mandate as well as during the independence periods, their traditional loyalty to the government created the image for Circassians that they are law-abiding and loyal Syrian citizens. Successful doctors, farmers, businessmen, civilian and military bureaucrats, politicians, scientists, authors and poets were brought up among Syrian Circassians. They do not have the same influence they had among military elites of Syria two decades ago.*

*Due to the recent developments, certain Syrian Circassians applied for the Russian Federation to help them returning to Northwestern Caucasus, which is their historical homeland, as Syria is on the verge of a civil war. However, Moscow has not taken a decision related to Syrian Circassians yet. As from early 2012, Syrian Circassians started to leave Syria and settle in the Republics of Adygea, Kabardino-Balkar and Karachay-Cherkessia in the Russian Federation; in Reyhanlı district of Hatay and İstanbul in Turkey; in Lebanon; in Jordan; and in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates.*



## Introduction

Since March 2012, the violence in Syria has been increasing with each passing day. While the world strives to find a solution for Syrian crisis, nobody can come up with a solution of-fer with high chance of success and with defi-nite instruments. One of the most important reason is the unsettled situation in Syria and the fact that the Damascus administration and the opposition are all mixed both in so-cial and geographic terms.

Ethnic and sectarian splits constitute one of the most important aspects of the conflict. The extension of the instability in Syria over a long period of time and a wide area scares most the minorities. Because the minorities think that they are open to attack and that they cannot protect themselves. Besides, the experiences taking place in the Middle East-ern countries hit by the wave of uprising in-crease the concerns. Therefore, minorities try not to take sides in the conflict taking place in Syria.

Another community which is concerned about the developments in Syria is the Syrian Circassians.<sup>1</sup>Currently there are 90 thousand to 100 thousand Circassians, most of whom live in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs in Syria. Circassians arrived in Syria during the first half of the 19th century as they were exiled in the aftermath of the Great Caucasian War, during the mid-1860s as a part of the settle-ment process of Circassians in the Ottoman Empire. The Circassian immigration into cur-rent Syrian territories continued until the be-ginning of 1920s. Having an effective position in social, cultural and political life of Syria in the past, Circassians are currently an impor-tant component of the Syrian society as well.

However, the recent developments have negatively been affecting Syrian Circassians. In this study, it is aimed to deal with Syrian Circassians from past to present which is not brought to agenda much while discussing the

events in Syria. Within this framework, first of all the settlement process of Circassians in the Middle East and then in Syria will be dealt with. In this section the exile process of Circassians from North Caucasus, the areas they settled in and their relations with other groups will be discussed. In the following sec-tion, there will be information on the current geographical distribution of Syrian Circas-sians, their demographic structure, economic life and cultures. The study will be concluded with the section where how Syrian Circas-sians have been affected by the popular upris-ing in Syria and what kind of attitude Circas-sians adopted is analyzed.

### 1. Circassians in the Middle East

Circassians came out in Northwestern Cau-casus in earliest times, and they lived in along the Kuban river, its southern Black Sea cost-line on the southern part, and on northern Caucasus Mountains from Anapa to Tuapse. Actually the Circassian geographic name can be seen all along the coastlines of North-western Caucasus and the Sea of Azov. On writ-ten sources, Circassian name is seen as of 13<sup>th</sup> century.

During and after the Caucasus-Russia War, Circassian territories were invaded and colo-nized by the Tsardom of Russia. These ter-ritories were called Kuban and Terek oblasts until the end of the Tsardom of Russia. Nev-ertheless, according to the 1829 Edirne (Adri-anopol) Agreement, the war attained another level as the Ottoman Empire left its fortresses on the Black Sea coastline to the Tsardom of Russia, and Russia gained a legal basis on the international arena to invade Circassian territories. Losing the war, Circassians were forced to leave their homeland. As a result, more than a million Circassians settled in Ot-toman territories.

During the Circassian Mamelukes period, there were considerable amount of Circas-sians in garrisons in Syria which was under

the domination of Egypt. Those Circassians continued their existence during the Ottoman Empire period as well. However, those who formed the Circassian diaspora in Syria today are the descendants of those who came to Syria as a result of the great exile in 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 1864. Circassians arrived in Syria during mid-1860s as a result of the fact that they were exiled in the aftermath of Caucasus-Russia War and as a part of Circassians' settlement process in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire had several goals in creating Circassian settlements. The administration made use of the uncultivated lands with Circassians, who had higher agricultural techniques compared to the local people. They protected the Arab farmer settlements from the attacks of Arab nomads. The Ottoman Empire benefited from Circassians, who had strong military tradition, against the rising independence movements of Druses who posed a problem for İstanbul. The number of Muslim population within the Ottoman Empire increased due to Circassians. Circassians were settled in places near the Hejaz railway route planned to be constructed, and thus the security of the railway was strived to be provided. For similar reasons, Circassians were settled in the areas with stream beds such as the Golan Heights, and thus these areas were secured.

During this period, several Circassian villages were formed in Palestine. There was a major loss of population due to hard living conditions, diseases and famine. A village (Raba in the neighborhood of Keysariya) was dissolved. Kfar-Kama (3000 people) and Reyhaniye (1000 people), which are currently located in Israel, survived though. In 1920 when the Great Britain established a new Arab State, Jordan, certain Circassians entered under the rule of emirate. Two villages in Halil (Kfar-Kama ve Reyhaniye), on the other hand, remained in Palestine under the mandate government; and were included in the Israeli borders in 1948. Circassians always had a good relationship with both Arabs and

Jews. When the independence war of Israel broke out, they took sides with Jews. They joined the Israeli Defense Army, and fought against the Jordanian legion in Halil.

## 2. History of Syrian Circassians

The territories known as Syria were then composed of Ottoman Empire's Syria (Damascus), Aleppo and Beirut provinces, some parts of Mosul province, sanjaks of Jerusalem and Lebanon. The province of Syria (Damascus) included current Syria, some parts of Lebanon and Jordan. The province of Aleppo was composed of current northern Syria, the Sanjak of Urfa, Antep and İskenderun districts which are currently located in Turkey. Current eastern Syria was included in the Deir ez-Zor governorate under the administration of Mosul province. The Sanjak of Jerusalem contained Southern Palestine, and the Sanjak of Lebanon included interior highlands of present Lebanon.

The settlement of Circassians into Syria took place in two stages: Directly from Northwestern Caucasus by land, and from Balkans by sea. After 1864, one of the first groups arriving from North Caucasus were settled in northern Syria, in Marash sanjak, and they were charged with 'surveilling' the Zeytun district where Armenians lived. Afterwards, in 1872 approximately a thousand Circassians were settled in the neighborhood of Hama and Homs, as well as in the Golan Heights within the borders of the Sanjak of Hauran.<sup>2</sup> In 1881 800 Circassian families lived in 6 villages in the Sanjak of Marash.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1865 and 1866, 13,648 Chechens were settled in small groups in Rasul-Ayn in eastern Syria and on the borderline of the Sanjak of Diyarbakır, in order to stop the attacks of Bedouins and Kurds in the neighborhood. Most of them were killed in local conflicts and due to various diseases, and some of them immigrated to other regions. In 1880, approximately 5 thousand Chechens remained in the neighborhood of Rasul-Ayn in 1880.<sup>4</sup>

In 1872, some 1000 Circassians were settled in the Golan Heights within the sanjak of Hauran and in the neighborhood of Hama and Homs. According to what elders say, firstly they arrived in Samsun by ship, then came to Uzunyayla (Kayseri-Sivas) and lastly arrived in Syria.

The real migration wave of Circassians to Syria began following the 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian War (93 War) mainly from European-Balkan territories of the Ottoman Empire. During the period of mass exile from North Caucasus, many Circassians were settled in present Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus and Crete islands. According to official statistical information of the Tsardom of Russia, more than 150 thousand Circassians lived in Balkans in 1876. Some 90.000 of them lived in Bulgaria. Circassians were settled in this area by the Ottoman Empire in order to fight against the insurrections of the Christian people. During the uprising broke out in Bulgaria in 1876 and during the 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian War, Circassian cavalries were sent to the major front lines as they were one of the best troops of the Ottoman army.

During the Conference of European States held in İstanbul on December 1876 – January 1877, the idea suggesting that Circassians would be settled in Asian provinces of the Ottoman Empire was put forward. As the Russian army attacked, Circassians left their villages and took to the roads along with the troops of the Ottoman army that withdrew. Thus, the second exile began. According to the decision taken by the Council of Russian Command that convened in Plovdiv (Filipopol) on August 1878, all Muslim refugees who left their homes were entitled to return to Bulgaria. However, Circassians were exempted from this right. Circassians, who could not find time to leave Bulgaria by then, were settled “out of the Principality of Bulgaria at the disposal of the local administration”. In Ayastefanos and Berlin Agreements, the problem of Circassians who had to immi-

grate from Balkans were put aside, and it was only agreed that “Circassian troops would not be resorted to in border garrisons”. So that, exiles were deprived of all kind of rights and guarantees to make life both by these states and the Ottoman Empire for the second time.

After the end of 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian War, insurgencies in Terek Oblast, Abkhazia and Daghistan exiled from North Caucasus increased to a large extent. Some of these exiles were sent to Syria and Palestine. Starting from the spring of 1878, Ottoman and European ships carrying Circassian exiles coming from Balkans and North Caucasus arrived in Syrian coastlines on a regular basis for two years. The exile took place under extremely difficult conditions. After the exiles arrived, they used sleep outdoors waiting to be provided a permanent place to live. Thousands of them died of starvation and contagious diseases.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with the Berlin Agreement, the Ottoman government placed Circassians exiled from Balkans in Anatolia, Syria and Palestine.

Some of the Circassian exiles got on board from Bulgaria and the Black Sea ports of Romania and passed straits, while some others arrived in Aegean coastlines of Greece by land and got on board to go to eastern ports of Mediterranean. Then they arrived in hinterlands of Syria by land.

In early spring of 1878, ships carrying the exiles to Syrian coasts started to arrive. According to the statements of French Consul General, 1000 Circassian arrived in the Port of Beirut in early March 1878.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, according to the information sent by the Russian Consul General in Aleppo to the Embassy in İstanbul; on March 1878, 20 thousand immigrants coming from North Caucasus and Crimea arrived in İskenderun, one third of them died of diseases and famine, and the rest of them either returned to İstanbul or could not be heard of.<sup>7</sup> Those Circassian exiles were Abzekhs who used to live

in Adliye district of Bulgaria.<sup>8</sup> Abzekhs were settled in the province of Aleppo. During the same period, another group coming from Balkans were settled in the Golan Heights in the Sanjak of Hauran. The number of Circassians arriving in various ports of Syria reached 45 thousand by September 1878. Those who were expected to come from Salonica and they were planned to be settled in the neighborhood of Nablus.<sup>9</sup> Very few Circassians were placed in city centers of Damascus and Aleppo. A neighborhood was created in Damascus by those who arrived from Bulgaria in 1878.

Circassians were mainly settled in the Golan Heights as a military line in Syria. The line extended across the Druse regions and formed a kind of borderline with the Bedouin tribes. 13 villages were settled around the headquarter Kuneytra ranging from 4 to 17 km intervals.

Small groups of Circassians were sent from Batum and Kars, which were invaded by the Tsardom of Russia following the 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian war, to Syria. Also there were exiles directly arriving from North Caucasus. The Circassian exile started to decline in early 1880s.

It is difficult to detect the accurate number of those who settled in Syria between the years 1878-1880. The authority did not record the numbers, and furthermore the majority of population died during the exile and after they settled in the area. According to the information provided by the Consul of Russia, more than 45 thousand Circassians were exiled in the aforesaid period. Along with those who arrived beforehand, the number of Circassians in Syria reached some 70 thousand. The administration granted demesne land, in other words from the state treasury, to Circassians. The distribution was made according to the following principles: a family with three people was granted with 70 decares of land, while a family with four-five people was granted with 130 decares of land. The Circas-

sian families shared the lands according to feudal military-manorial system, independently of their former social class (in return for their military service).

In late 1880s, the Circassian immigration into Syria still continued in less amounts though. Both due to the conflicts with the neighboring tribes and also due to the infertile lands, Circassians could not have pulled themselves together. Exemption from ten years of tax and military service ended in 1888, and immigrants who could not settle yet received a severe blow by this situation; and it was followed by disorders that reach uprisings. İstanbul Migration Committee gave the authorization to the authorities in Syria to meet the necessary expenses for the settlement of Circassians from the committee account. Nevertheless, it was only in 1902 that an aid committee was created in Damascus by order of the government in order to organize the settlement of immigrants, to finance, to provide crop, animal and instruments, as well as to help with house constructions. Due the reasons such as the insufficiency of money and aid, their settlement in arid lands, the presence of the committee in Damascus could not solve the problem of Circassians either.

Circassian cavalcades were used against rebellious Bedouin tribes and in suppressing Druse insurgencies. They were effective in suppressing the uprising that broke out in Kerake in 1893 and 1910. It was an obligation for Circassians, who were settled in small groups among different ethnic groups acting hostile against them, to take part in the Ottoman military force.

Circassians contributed to the economic development of the regions they were settled in. They started to produce more developed agricultural implements and wheeled vehicles, and build stone houses and mills. They implemented developed traditional agricultural techniques to a large extent. They grew new plants such as millet and oat. Living in

Syria and Palestine for a decade, the Russian scientist A. Ruppin wrote those on this subject: "Circassians brought along more developed agricultural implements, two massive wooden wheeled and iron hooped wagons, oat planting as well as a great order in household appliances from North Caucasus. Besides they were hardworking. They cleaned their fields from stones. So that almost all of them reached a standard of living that might be considered as wealthy."

From the very beginning, the Ottoman administration started to recruit Circassians to administrative and military services, mainly to the police department. A cavalry troop of 300 Circassians was created in Amman. Mirza Vasfi was the head of the troop. The cavalry troops consisting of the Circassian police were deployed in Kuneytra, Aleppo, Jerash and Kerak.<sup>10</sup> The Circassian troops were charged with collecting taxes from the people, protecting main roads and most importantly fighting against the Bedouin tribes which did not bow to the government. The Circassian troops were organized in accordance with the regular army system, they were reinforced by those who skillfully use weapon, and constituted one of the best troops of the armed forces. The service in police department was considered equal to the service in the regular army. Circassian troops were used to suppress the insurgencies of Druses and city-dwellers. The assaults of Bedouin tribes against agricultural areas were prevented and some of these tribes entered under the rule of government thanks to the Circassian troops.

Bedouins, Druses, Kurds and Fella Arabs considered the territories, which Circassians accepted as a present from Sultan, as their own fields. The negotiations carried out to solve the conflicts did not succeed and the parties who were in disagreement took up arms.

Circassians, who settled in the Golan Heights, were attacked by the nomad Bedouin Fadl

tribe in the area on their very first day. First of all armed conflicts took place between the two parties. Then it was followed by a major raid carried out by Bedouins against Mansoura, a Circassian village. The Ottoman administration took advantage of this situation and organized a banishment expedition on Bedouins. Following this expedition, Circassians followed the tradition of blood revenge, and organized counterattack against the nomads.

In their conflicts against Bedouins, Circassians had the edge over them in terms of war skills and weapons. However, they fell behind Bedouins in number to a great extent. Moreover, Circassian villages had to fight against two or more tribes at the same time. In Bedouin-Circassian conflicts, both parties showed various hostile actions against one another. Immigrants let their cattle out in the fields of Circassians, and made them destroy their crops. Sometimes Circassians confiscated those herds of cattle and prevented Bedouins from approaching water resources.

Especially the Druse-Circassian conflict caused by the land conflict became continuous and bloody. Similar to Bedouins, Druses had been staking claim on the Golan Heights since old times. In the beginning, Druses were satisfied with their reconnaissance actions and with opening fire against the Circassian villages. In 1881, they carried out a major raid against Circassians. Nevertheless, Druses failed in these raids. The Druse troop of 600 people were defeated as a result of their raid against the Mansoura village. It was followed by the raids of Circassian troops against the Druse regions. Bloody conflicts continued until 1889 when those two parties reached a peace agreement.

In 1894, a new conflict broke out. It was caused by the attack of a Druse group along with a sheep herd against a Circassian couple. During the conflict a Circassian woman was killed. According to the Circassian traditions, murdering a woman was considered as

a felony. However, Circassian elders forbade the young people to take a revenge and they applied for the district governor of Kuneytra to punish the criminals. They sent a delegation to Druse sheikhs to investigate the aforesaid event. Sheikhs expressed their apologies for the event and they stated they were ready to pay the blood money (300 Ottoman liras) in accordance with the sharia law and to surrender the criminals if they are identified. But it was only a tactic. In accordance with the agreement, Circassian representatives set out to identify the criminals. They were attacked by Druses who intercepted them. In the conflict four Druses were killed and the two parties started preparations for a war again. Messengers were sent from Hauran to all Druse regions of Lebanon with a call for an immediate aid. Detachments set out from Hasbeyi, Rasheyi and Vadi-Acama to the Majdal Shams, the center of Druses. Money and weapons were provided by Lebanon. The Governor of Lebanon Naim Pasha had to intervene in the war preparations of Druses and a legal investigation opened regarding this event with his order. The district governor of Kuneytra went to Druses in order to stop preparations for war along with a gendarmerie detachment. But he was captured and was released in exchange for Druses who had been imprisoned. Then the district governor came to Mansour where Circassian warriors were gathered from the neighboring villages. The district governor asked them to disperse by promising that he would absolutely investigate the case in the eye of law. Circassians believed in the district governor and they dispersed. On 24<sup>th</sup> May 1894, towards 10 a.m., a Druse army of some 10.000 people opened fire against Mansour. And there was a counterattack from the windows and roofs of the houses. The clash, in which Circassians from neighboring villages joined as they heard the gunshots, lasted for approximately 14 hours. First of all Druses approached near the village, and tried to enter in. Nevertheless, they were repelled by Circassians despite the fact that they outnumbered. According to Balyayev,

the Consul of Russia, 88 Druses were killed in this conflict. As for the loss of Circassians, on the other hand, 44 men, 4 women, 7 children were killed and 4 people got wounded. In the evening of the same day Husrev Pasha, Head of the police department of the province, arrived in the crime scene. He gathered the leaders of the both parties and proposed a peace settlement. However, Circassians considered only Druses guilty and refused to reach an agreement by insisting on their punishment. The police commander could only get a promise that there would be no hostile action until a administrative authorities investigate the case.

As Circassians were not hopeful about a fair outcome from the investigation, they reached Sultan by sending him a message via official authorities. In their message, they accused the Rauf Pasha, Governor of Syrian Province, of secretly protecting Druses and demanded a change in his position. And as a result, the governor and the district governor of Kuneytra were unseated. The new governor Osman Nuri Pasha set up a commission to investigate the Druse-Circassian conflict under his own presidency by following the orders coming from İstanbul to solve the problem as soon as possible. According to the conditions suggested to Circassians, Druses would pay 1000 liras to Mansourians and apologize. Truce was signed on 9 August 1894. 35 Druse sheikhs came from Hasbeyi, Rashei, Beka-Atı and Majdal Shams to Mansoura and apologized. Despite the agreement reached, both parties lived with the expectation of a new conflict and continued to get prepared for this.

In autumn of 1895, a new Druse uprising broke out. The Druse uprisings both carried the characteristics of national independence, and also involved banditry actions such as killing Christians and plundering Fellahs. In Hauran warriors gathered from different Druse regions, and they reached 10 thousand people. 9 villages were destroyed and 100 civil people were killed as a result of the Druse at-

tacks by November. This situation led the Ottoman administration to create new military units to suppress the insurgents. During the same period, small-scale conflicts, which led to the revival of the old hostility and to new clashes, took place between Circassians and Druses. In the morning of 19 November 1895, a Druse army of 3 thousand people were split in two and headed towards the Mansoura village. One of the groups would attack against Circassians, and the other half (Fadl Tribe) would go to the other side. The total number of Circassian and Bedouin troops was 2 thousand people. A Circassian prominent figure Anchok Ahmad Bey was the head of the army. The allied army went out of the village and fought against Druses. In the thick of the battle, Ahmad Bey was killed, and Circassian-Bedouin troops started to withdraw. Nevertheless, at that point Circassian police cavalry troop headed by Mirza Bey arrived and attacked against Druses. Right afterwards, a police group came from Beirut and they attacked against Druses as well. Druses ran away by leaving 400 losses behind. Circassian and Bedouin troops chased the Druses and advanced through the Druse regions and devastated Majdal Shams. Kurdish troops joined the army which was headed by Said Pasha and was created against Druses. The united army carried on their attacks and set the Halos, Harar, Ayne, Koniye, Zehitu and Beka Atu villages on fire. On 20 November 1895, an Ottoman troop of 400 infantries, 200 cavalries and two artilleries headed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Divison commander Nuri Pasha came from Damascus to Hauran. Then the 4<sup>th</sup> Army Commander General Memduh Pasha along with his three infantry battalions mobilized.

Circassian-Bedouin-Kurdish cavalries also joined this troop. On 4 and 7 December 1896, clashes took place between Ottoman forces and Druses, and the insurgents were defeated at the end. The government removed the autonomy of Druse areas as a punishment.

In military history of Syria, there are many skillful Circassian officers who served within the Ottoman army. One of them is Marshal Osman Fevzi Pasha in Syria in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Circassian Husrev Pasha was the Head of police department in Syrian Province for a long time. Abkhasian Muhammad Bek Marshan was the military commander in Aleppo province in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. General Mirza Pasha Vasfi, commander of Circassian Cavalry Troop in Amman, and many others are mentioned in the Syrian history.

According to the information provided by Zuyev, Deputy Consul General of Russia in Damascus, there were 6.065 Circassian families composed of 36.690 people lived in the province of Syria on February 1904.<sup>11</sup> There are other sources claiming this figure to be 30 thousand and 40 thousand. However, the most accurate information was provided after the establishment of the French mandate regime in Syria in 1920. The French researcher De Proux believes that approximately 25 thousand Circassians lived in Syrian territories in mid-1930s.<sup>12</sup> The results of the census taken by the French Mandate regime in 1935 are listed on the following table. (It might be concluded that at that period there were approximately 25 thousand Circassians living in Syria, considering that a family was composed of 5-8 people:

**Table – 1 The Census Taken by French Mandate Regime**

Sanjak	District	Settlement	Number of Households	Ethnic Structure
Aleppo	-	Aleppo	100	Adygea (Kabardino and Abzekh)
	Jebel-Sman	Hanasir village	100	Adygea (Kabardino)
	Mumbuc	Mumbuc village	400	Adygea (Abzekh)
	Azaz	Ayn Dahan village	15	Adygea (Abzekh)
İskenderun	Antakya	Bedirge village	35	Adygea (Abzekh)
	Kırıkhan	Reyhaniye village	120	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Yenişehir village	95	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Harran village	60	Adygea (Abzekh)
Deir-ez-Zor		Salahiya district	20	Chechen
		Rakka village	100	Adygea (Kabardino), Chechen
		Ras el Ayn village	70	Chechen
		Kara village	50	Chechen
		Safih village	80	Chechen
		Tel Ruman village	10	Chechen
Hama		Mireic Eddar village	50	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Tel Snan village	120	Adygea (Bzhedug), Abaza
		Tel Adda village	60	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Deyl el Acel village	50	Adygea (Kabardey)
		Cessin village	30	Daghistan (Avar)
Homs	Humus	Homs village	50	Daghistan (Avar, Lezgi, Kumuk)
		Ayn Zat village	180	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Tel Amri village	150	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Abu Hamama village	30	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Asil village	60	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Deyr Fur village	160	Daghistan
		Tlil village	50	Adygea (Bzhedug)
Damascus	Damascus	Muhacirin district	60	Adygea (Bzhedug, Kabardino and Abzekh)
		Marj Sultan village	70	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Boydan village	30	Karachay and Balkarian
		Bley village	150	Karachay and Balkarian



Hauran	Kuneytra	Kuneytra	400	Adygea (Abzekh and Kabardey)
		Mansoura village	120	Adygea (Bzhedug and Abzekh)
		Ayn Zivan	150	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Mumsiya village	50	Abaza
		Cuveyza village	100	Adygea (Abzekh and Kabardino)
		Breyka village	150	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Bir Acam village	70	Adygea (Bzhedug, Kabardino and Abzekh)
		Surman village	120	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Kochniya village	150	Adygea (Kabardino and Abzekh), Abaza
		Faham village	20	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Fazara village	10	Ossettian
		Hamidiya village <sup>13</sup>	30	Adygea (Kabardino)
		Ayn Surman village	30	Adygea (Kabardino)
		Ruhina village	25	Adygea (Abzekh)
		Sandaniya village <sup>14</sup>	10	Chechen
Alaviti		Ceblya village	50	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Arab el Mülk village	20	Adygea (Bzhedug)
		Sukass village	15	Adygea (Bzhedug)
Total	-	-	4039	

The accurate number of Circassians who settled in Syria is not known. The authorities could not record the accurate statistics during the migration in 1878-1880. The fact that Circassians could not keep their own records makes it difficult to estimate the population. Besides, the Circassian population declined due to various deaths during the period of second exile from Balkans. According to the information provided by the Consulates of Russia in Damascus and Beirut, the number of Circassians who were settled in Syria between 1878-1880 ranged from 40 thousand to 50 thousand. Based on the research he carried out, İzzet Aydemir considers that in the aforesaid period some 70 thousand Circassians settled in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The accurate statistical in-

formation in Syria could only be obtained after the establishment of colonist mandate regimes of France and Britain in Transjordan in 1920. According to the census taken in 1935, 4.039 Circassian families with the population of 25 thousand people lived in Syria. Accordingly, it is seen that a family was composed of 5-8 people. During the same period, 9 thousand people lived in eight Circassian villages in Transjordan; 850 of them were Chechen. According to the census, 900 people lived in two Circassian villages (Reyhaniye and Kfar-Kama) created in Palestinian territories (present Israel) in early 1930s.

In February 1904, Damascus Governor Nazım Pasha wanted to take a census in Hauran in

order to collect tax. However, Circassians did not accept this; and they also demanded cultivated lands in Maan region. Nazım Pasha asked the Consulate of Russia to send the disobedient Circassians back to North Caucasus. Nevertheless, he had to give up on this as the agreement signed between the two states prohibited repatriation of exiles. Circassian Husrev Pasha, who was assigned for the talks on September 1905, convinced his cognates to give up on their disobedience and to stay still for a little longer after long and hard talks.<sup>16</sup>

During the years of World War I, the Ottoman Empire declared mobilization in Circassian districts of Syria, and basic privates were sent to the areas where the battle was thick. Military command assigned Circassian police troops to protect the routes and food bases in Syria.

In 1916, the Sharif of Mecca Hussein and his son Faisal initiated the Arab revolt supported by the Britain in 1916. Feeling the Ottoman pressure on themselves, Syrian Arabs actively supported the revolt. The Circassian people in this area had hard times in political terms. Their loyalty to the Ottoman Empire increased the hostile actions of Arabs, who considered Circassians as the soldiers of Ottoman State. The elders of Circassian villages remember the armed conflicts that constantly took place with Arabs. When the army of Sharif Hussein arrived in Northern Syria, Arabs who lived in the neighborhood of Circassian town Mumbuc asked them to destroy Mumbuc. Hearing of the approaching Arab army, Circassians sent a delegate declaring that local people of Mumbuc wanted to support the Arab revolt. This was the first event that Circassians took sides with Arabs during the years of war. In 1920 when the French troops started to invade Syria, people of Mumbuc adhered to the agreement they had signed with Arabs and fought against the French troops. But they failed in the war where they fought against motorized units.

In Transjordan, Circassians fought hard against the British troops. On March 1918, the Ottoman troops withdrew due to the pressure of the General Allenby's 6<sup>th</sup> British Army. Circassian troops clashed with the British troops. After the big losses on both parties, the British, who had an advantage both in number and in terms of weapon, won; and they invaded Transjordan.

During the conference held in San Remo on April 1920, the victorious European states took the Arab territories from the Ottoman Empire for good. According to the mandate system, the League of Nations gave Iraq and Palestine back to Britain. The majority of Syria entered under the rule of colonist regime of France.

Despite in small numbers, Circassians' immigration from North Caucasus to Syria continued until the early 1920s. Circassians mostly settled in the Golan Heights, Transjordan, in the neighborhoods of Hama, Homs and Aleppo.<sup>17</sup> The Amman, Jerash, Kuneytra and Mumbuc villages they created grew bigger and turned into cities.<sup>18</sup> The last group of Circassians arrived in the aftermath of the World War II. This group was mostly composed of the former soldiers of the Red Army who were captured by the Germans and did not return to North Caucasus, and the young men who joined the German army in the invasion of North Caucasus by Nazi Germany in 1942.

The immigration continued until 1920s due to the reasons such as conflicts with neighboring tribes and the infertility of lands. While some groups immigrated from Syria, some others who were in the search of more fertile lands migrated within Syria; small settlements combined with the bigger ones. For instance, those who were the victims of contagious diseases in Damascus settled along with their cognates in Kuneytra.

In 1920s, when Syria was under the French mandate, some Circassians served for the French administration as cavalry troops maintaining internal order. In this period, Circassian intellectuals started to strive for the revival of their culture under the leadership of Emin Semguğ. Approximately 40 schools were opened mostly in Kuneytra region. The weekly newspaper "Marc" started to be published in Arabic, French and in Circassian with Roman letters in 1928. Nevertheless, in 1936 when the French mandate government came to an end, the Syrian government closed the schools, the newspaper and the benefit society. After the French left, it became more critical for Circassians. Arab nationalists accused Circassians of cooperating with French occupants and launched an anti-Circassian campaign. Those who served in French troops and intellectuals had to leave Syria.

After the World War II, thanks to the good relations developed between Syria and the Soviet Union, Syrian Circassians found the opportunity to develop relations with their cognates living in North Caucasus. Particularly 1960s was a bright era. Large amount of books, newspapers, magazines, cassettes etc. were brought from Caucasus. Although Syrian Circassians preserved their cultures and identities in general, they always felt the threat of losing their language and cultures for various reasons such as their limited and dispersed population, and the Syrian government's being oppressive about cultural rights.

On November 1947, when Palestine was split into two states, conflicts broke out between Syrian and Israeli troops. Afterwards, Circassians formed voluntary troops led by İhsan Şurduş, who later became the Commander of the Royal Jordanian Air Force, and joined the war in Palestine. Between 1948-49, the voluntary and effective participation of Circassians in the Arab-Israeli war positively affected the relationship between Arabs and Circassians.

With high discipline and war skills, Circassian troops played an effective role in consecutive military coups in Syria taking place in the aftermath of the war. In 1960, the population of Syrian Circassians declined to 38 thousand people. The Arab-Israeli war that broke out on June 1967 caused to major changes in socio-economic and political situation of the Syrian Circassian society. The first and most severe blow Syria received by Israel came from the Golan Heights where the majority of Circassians lived. During the same period 16 thousand Circassians lived in Kuneytra and villages in the neighborhood.<sup>19</sup> Kuneytra was considered as the cultural center of Syrian Circassians. While the Syrian army, which gave great losses in the face of Israeli troops, progressing with the support of jets and tanks, withdrew; Circassian resisted hopelessly. The Israeli troops invaded Kuneytra on 9 June 1967; they totally destroyed the city and the neighboring Circassian villages. Circassians, who had to leave Golan, were temporarily placed in schools and hospitals in Damascus by the Syrian Circassian Benefit Society. In this period, a group of young people launched a campaign to return to North Caucasus. The USSR embassy received applications on behalf of 3 thousand people. However, response to these applications was that the Soviet Union could not immediately accept Circassians, and that their requests would be assessed later on.

The U.S. government handled the situation of Circassian refugees. In return for their giving up on the territories in the Golan Heights, it was proposed to those who wanted, to settle in the U.S., in Paterson city located in the State of New Jersey where mostly North Caucasian people who were World War II refugees lived. In the first group a thousand people settled in the U.S. The immigration of Syrian Circassians in the U.S. has been continuing since then. Some of the refugees immigrated to Jordan, to other Arab states, or to West European countries. Those who stayed in Syria, on the other hand, settled in Damascus and in the neighborhood.

### 3. The Current Presence of Circassians in Syria: Transformation Era

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Syrian Circassians underwent a transformation. First of all, the environment where they live has changed; Most of the Circassians currently live in Damascus due to the internal migration. Today, Damascus is one of the largest capitals of the “East”. According to the official figures of 2009, the population of Damascus is 1.771.000 people. Including the neighboring settlements affiliated to the capital in economic and infrastructural terms, 2,4 million people live here based on the figures in 2004. Like any other city, Damascus is actually composed of several Damascus’ within itself. The old city is composed of forgotten ghettos with weak infrastructure and with peeled off houses. It is necessary to watch out while wandering around the labyrinthian alleys as a tourist or while driving a car. The other Damascus, on the other hand, is a self-sufficient administrative center with its contemporary architecture, expensive stores, wealthy residences, and modern clinics. The “second Damascus” has become a center of attraction for the Circassian elites in Syria. Here, Circassians found themselves in a modern city life refining the traditional life style. More dynamic rhythm of life, new concept of time and the necessity of keeping up with it, intense exchange of information, and access to new technologies have put an end to the traditional self-enclosed structure of the Circassian society for the last 20-30 years. Bilingualism has become widespread among Circassians as a result of this situation. I was not that common among the old generation who only knows Circassian. Circassians, who live in the cities, started to have a command of Arabic and right afterwards of English. Studying in Maykop in Northwestern Caucasus, Syrian Circassians speak daily English without problem. Circassians have acquired new professions for the last three decades. Today, they do not only work in the institutions related to army, security and ministry of defense; they also work in scientific, cultural, higher education and medical fields.

The traditional profession of Circassians was military service until recently. Both during the Ottoman period and French mandate as well as during the independence periods, their traditional loyalty to the government created the image for Circassians that they are law-abiding and loyal Syrian citizens. Anzor Kushabiye, who is the only Russian researcher carrying on studies on Circassian diaspora in Syria, states that “There were 30-35 effective Circassian generals in armed forces of the country towards the end of 1990s”. But it would be an exaggeration to define Syrian Circassians as a military class. There are successful doctors, farmers, businessmen, civilian and military bureaucrats, politicians, scientists, authors and poets among Syrian Circassians. They do not have the same influence they had among military elites of Syria two decades ago. The idea suggesting that Circassians are a military class is too exaggerated. Certain analysts write that currently there is no Circassian in security forces of Assad and in key positions within army. While such severe transformations take place, Syrian Circassians consider North Caucasus as moral homeland like before. On the other hand, the identity of young Circassians belong to the neighborhood of Adyge-Habze which was recreated. Both in 1920s and 1960s, Syrian Circassians sent petitions to the USSR in order to return to their historical homelands. There are correspondences on this subject in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). While the relations with Syrian Circassian diaspora had a nominal character with hardships due to the bureaucratic obstacles, today internet has removed the borders in communication and has become one of the factors affecting formation of Circassian consciousness in all diaspora countries. The communication of Syrian Circassians with Circassians in the Russian Federation is not only limited with personal and affinity relationships. In addition to this, the Adyge-Abkhaz group on facebook is developing through the communication in “Western Caucasus”; it is not that active though.

#### 4. Popular Uprising in Syria and Circassians

Today, there are 90 thousand to 100 thousand Circassians, most of whom live in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs in Syria. The Circassian people are a part of the Syrian society. Of course, some of them support the Assad regime, while others oppose it. Some Circassians have been taking part in the anti-government demonstrations since the beginning. 5 of 11 people, who participated in the demonstrations near the Ministry of Interior and were arrested, were Circassians. It is known that Governor Mirza has sided with the opposition. Sheikh Jawdat Said Tsey, who is a member of the "Syrian National Council" that is currently the main group representing the insurgents and who is also a well-known Islamic scholar in Syria, is Circassian and has been explicitly opposing to Bashar Assad. Sheikh Jawdat Said Tsey is one of the prominent Islamic authorities in Syria and he is known for his opposition to violence across the Islamic world. He was one of the 20 signatories of the open letter which they wrote with their colleagues and where they expressed their concern about the violent actions of the Assad government against the Syrian people.

North Caucasus showed its first reaction to the increasing violence in Syria on December 2011. The Circassian Congress of Karachay-Cherkess Republic Regional Popular Movement called for the President of Russian Federation Medvedev to provide an opportunity for Syrian Circassian diaspora to return to North Caucasus.<sup>20</sup> Immediately after this demand, the Circassian Congress of the Adygea Republic demanded the Russian Federation to take an action for the transfer of Syrian Circassians, who were in the middle of the conflict, to North Caucasus.<sup>21</sup> Then, Syrian Circassians became the center of attention of the media which dealt with Caucasus in the Russian Federation. As from 6 January 2012, four Syrian Circassian groups of approximately 300 people applied to the President

of Russian Federation Medvedev and to the presidents of North Caucasus Republics (to the President of Adygea Aslan Thakushinov, President of Kabardino-Balkaria Arsen Kanokov and to President of the Republic of Karachayev-Cherkessia Rashid Temrezov), where Adygeas are the founding nation, to help them return to their historical homelands during the period when Syria is on the verge of a civil war. On February 2012, the representatives of Circassian community in Syria paid a visit to the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. The representatives stated that Circassians wanted to go out from Syria, and that the people are scared of the future. They said Circassians have been trying to stay neutral between the regime and the opposition, but that the situation in the country is getting worse with each passing day.<sup>22</sup>

There are certain characteristics about the approach of Russian media towards the application of Syrian Circassians to the Russian Federation and to the public opinion. First of all, it has been observed that the well-respected media of the Russian Federation has more publications on the subject than expected. Secondly, the moderate discourse of all of them grabs the attention. Except for several attempts of disinformation from news portals that did not verify the accuracy of the information they had given, (such as; 5 million Ruble aid from the federal budget for Syrian Circassians returning to Northwestern Caucasus etc.) the media of Russian Federation is moderate and principled in general terms.

Moscow has not made a decision on Syrian Circassians yet. Suspicious voices are all around suggesting that in case Syrian Circassians are accepted in the Russian Federation this project would place a burden on the federal budget, Syrians would not work and they would be a burden considering they will be accorded special rights. However, the experience of Syrian Circassians returning to the Russian Federation in 1990s shows that this was certainly not the situation in Kabardino-



Picture: 1 Ber Ajam



Picture: 2 Ber Ajam

Picture: 3 Ber Ajam

Balkar and in Adygea (almost nobody returned to Karachay-Cherkessia). For example, there is an ideal environment in Adygea where adaptation could be faster. There are both official institutions (*Tsentr Adaptatsii Repatriantov*) and non-governmental organizations operating to help returnees with adapting themselves to the new environ-

ment. For instance, Nejdət Hatam Meshfesh who returned from Turkey long time ago, and Yahya Staş who returned from Syria actively work in the aforesaid non-governmental organizations. They especially help the students arriving from Turkey and the Arab countries. They tell in cooperation with the Committee on Relations with Nationalities



Picture: 4 Merj Al Sultan



Picture: 5 Merj Al Sultan



**Picture: 6 Merj Al Sultan**



**Picture: 7 Ber Ajam**



**Picture: 8 Ber Ajam**

and Cognatesand with the Adygea media that these students are not from the other people of Turkey, Jordan or Syria; but Adygea. Students from Syria and Turkey study in two local universities (Adygea State University and Technological University). A quota for 55

students from Syria and Turkey was allocated in this academic year. They have professors using special methods to teach Russian as a foreign language. The State Radio and Television Corporation broadcasts in three languages such as “Adygea” Circassian, Arabic





**Picture: 9 Marj Al Sultan**



**Picture: 10 Marj Al Sultan**



**Picture: 11 Marj Al Sultan**



**Picture: 12 Marj Al Sultan**



**Picture: 13 Marj Al Sultan**



**Picture: 14 Marj Al Sultan**

and Turkish; and it has been in cooperation with the Circassian satellite channel Nart TV in Jordan since 2009.

The Kosovo experience taught a lot. In 1998, Kosovo Circassians were brought from Yugoslavia, which was surrounded by war, to

Adygea with the active support of Moscow. A village called Mafehabl (Felicity Village) was created in the neighborhood of Maykop for Kosovo Circassians. Within the bounds of possibility, Kosovo Circassians were supported by the government of Kabardino-Balkar Republic, “Merkuriy” company of the

Karachay-Cherkessia Republic, Shapsugsky Adygea Hase, Adygea Hase of Krasnodar Krai, the U.S. Adygea Hase (New Jersey and California), Hase from Jordan, Kfar-Kama where Circassians live in Israel and Reyhaniye people, and Hamburg Adygea Hase. N. Kondratenko, Governor of Krasnodar Krai, also provided financial assistance of 200 thousand Ruble for the Foundation of Support for Returnees; while M. Irugov from Islamey village (Kabardino-Balkar Republic) built a mosque in Mafehabl with his own money. Returning to homeland was not easy for “Kosovans”. Certain local authorities acted intolerantly. Cultural differences, especially in terms of outlook on Islam, caused by having lived in different political and cultural environment for 150 years were mentioned. However, contrary to the pessimist expectations regarding Kosovans would leave soon, only 30 Yugoslavian Circassians went to Germany and Turkey among approximately 200 of them arriving in Adygea.

Circassians, who remained in their country in Northwestern Caucasus, created new employment opportunities for themselves. They learned Russian, and the young people studied at Adygea State University. As of 1990s, the returning experience of Circassians from Turkey, Syria and Kosovo to their homeland showed that those argued diaspora Circassians could not adapt themselves into the reality of Russian Federation are wrong. First of all, Circassians returning to Northwestern Caucasus respect law and stay loyal to the state accepting themselves. These characteristics of Circassians highlighted by specialists since before led them to be successful as expat-warrior in Poland and the Ottoman Empire during the middle and modern ages. Today, this characteristic help the descendants of refugees to ideally integrate into the Israeli, Turkish and Syrian security forces and armies. Secondly, the returnees are not a burden to anyone. They bring along work experiences that North Caucasian Circassians do not have yet. The dental clinics, dry cleaning, stores, fast-food restaurants, small facilities

producing chicken, clothe manufacturing factories, foreign language schools, construction companies opened by returnees create employment opportunities in Maykop, Nalchik and the villages they settled in.

Nevertheless, the Russian Federation has not been officially supporting the return of Circassians in parallel with its Syrian policy. Even though the government does not firmly opposes to returnees, Moscow pursues a policy of ‘silence’ on this subject and the problems of Syrian Circassians in Northwestern Caucasus arriving in Circassian republics are not dealt with at an official level. The “compatriots law” which accords the right to return their homeland and citizenship right does not work for the descendants of those who immigrated from the territories of the current Russian Federation for various reasons. However, local republics have annual quotas for this. The republics were given initiatives to increase the quotas when they reached the full capacity some time ago.

### 5. Aid Efforts For Syrian Circassians

Mainly, the aid for Syrian Circassians coming from Syria to North Caucasus has been organized by the non-governmental organizations. Kabardino-Balkarian Community Foundation “Perit” comes first among these organizations. According to the information recently obtained, 1800 people requested invitation from the Perit foundation. Only 1.250 of these requests could be met, while others still wait. In order to prepare the invitations, firstly the passport copies of those who made request are translated from Arabic to Russian. Application forms come from the Immigration Office a month later. However, as it is required to pay 500 ruble (15 dollars) for each invitation, economic difficulties add to the bureaucratic problems. There are many of those who cannot leave Syria due to the lack of travel allowance even if they receive invitation. Those who arrive, on the other hand, face problems such as rent and food expenses as and finding permanent place to live.



Picture: 15 Metin Alhas (Shagouj) Reyhanlı 17 Kasım 2012



Picture: 17 Metin Alhas (Shagouj) Reyhanlı 17 Kasım 2012



Picture: 18 Metin Alhas (Shagouj) Reyhanlı 17 Kasım 2012



**Picture: 19 Metin Alhas (Shagouj) Reyhanlı 17 Kasım 2012**



**Picture: 20 Metin Alhas (Shagouj) Reyhanlı 17 Kasım 2012**

As of September 2012, the number of Circassians coming from Syria to Northwestern Caucasus are 420 people. There are 370 people in Kabardino-Balkar Republic. Others were sent to the Adygea Republic. They stay in sanatoriums and hotels, and all their expenses are covered. 49 families among those accepted to settle in the houses purchased by the Perit Foundation in villages. They will pay it in two installments. The houses of those who left Caucasus 5 years ago by leaving their houses behind will be taken back.

The problems such as residence permit and extending the visa started to be solved despite the heavy-going bureaucracy. The increase in the number of Circassians "returning to homeland" depends on how the events in Syria develop and come to an end, as well as on the new order and how they proceed their life in their new settlements.

Also Circassians in Turkey have mobilized to help Circassians living in Syria. The Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED) based in Ankara launched a campaign for charity collection. KAFFED officials talked to Russian Ambassador to Ankara Vladimir Ivanovsky twice on the situation of Circassians in Syria and on what could be done. The demands mentioned during the talk can be listed as follows: The implementation of compatriots law within the constitution of

the Russian Federation for Syrian Circassians; increasing the annual quota of 450 people which was granted to the Kabardino-Balkar Republic and which is currently full; not requesting visa from those who want to go to Northwestern Caucasus from Syria considering the state of war; the Russian Federation to let those who want to return to their homeland like in Kosovo example as soon as possible.

In Turkey, civilian initiative groups also carry out activities to announce the problem to the public opinion. On 23 September 2012, members of the Circassian Platform announced the demands of Syrian Circassians to return to their homeland in front of the Embassy and Consulates of Russian Federation by staging simultaneous demonstrations in three cities in Turkey (İstanbul, Ankara, Antalya) and in Berlin. Besides they have been striving to collect charity through dinner organizations etc.

There is no Syrian Circassians in the camps in Turkey. It is known that some of them rented houses in cities near the borderline or stay with their relatives. Especially those who arrive in Reyhanlı district of Hatay, where Circassians live, with close relationship with Syrian Circassians are relatively more. Reyhanlı Circassian Foundation actively work for aid organization for those coming to Turkey.

Circassian friendly Viktor Lihtman who settled in Israel from Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, brought the letter of Israeli Circassians and representatives of non-governmental organizations from various countries to the Israeli government on August 6<sup>th</sup>. The demand of Syrian Circassians to be accepted in Israel was also mentioned in the aforesaid letter.

Most of the Circassians in the U.S. are Syrian and they mostly live in New Jersey. In 1967 when Israel invaded Golan, they were given the U.S. citizenship. They established the Nasip Foundation in 2010, aside from the Circassian Foundation which already existed in the U.S. In 2012, along with a delegation, they talked to New Jersey Senator (democrat) Robert Menendes, and called for a humanitarian aid for the Syrian Circassians under threat. In addition to this, they demanded the U.S. to provide shelter for Syrian Circassians in the U.S., in Jordanian and Turkish camps, and who live in military operation areas in Syria. Senator Menendes sent an official letter to the White House within 24 hours and demanded Barack Obama to help Syrian citi-

zens in the U.S. as soon as possible, and “to let Syrian citizens who immigrated to the United States stay in the country by granting them a temporary protected status. Obama positively responded to the Senator’s letter demanding the U.S. protection for Syrian Circassians. However, there is not many people coming to the U.S. except for those who left through affinity relationship from Syrian Circassians.

According to the recent information obtained from Syria, Circassians who mostly live in cities but also are related to villages take shelter in their villages when the conflicts get worse. Nevertheless, villages can no more absorb the dense population. As generally the opposition forces are in cities, villages are defenseless and massacres are more severe. However, the attacks of neither side have directly targeted Circassians.

In Syria, people can only go to Lebanon by air. The air corridors of Jordan and Turkey are closed. It is quite risky to go to neighboring countries by land, as the conflicts have increased in the areas especially near Turkey.































## ENDNOTES

- 1 Other Caucasian people (Abkhaza, Ossetian, Chechen and Daghistani) who live in Syria with few population are also called Circassian
- 2 Druses who immigrated from Lebanon in 1711 and 1860 settled in Hauran in southwestern Syria
- 3 Arhiv Vneşney Politiki Rossii (AVPR) (Rusya Dış Politika Arşivi). F. İstanbul Elçiliği. Op. 517 (2). D. 1127. L. 53.
- 4 AVPR. F. İstanbul Elçiliği. Op. 517 (2). D. 804. L. 18
- 5 European ambassadors have lots of published and unpublished memoirs telling the awfulness of the Circassian exile.
- 6 Aydemir, İzzet, Göç. Kuzey Kafkasyalıların Göç Tarihi. Ankara, 1988, p. 150.
- 7 AVPR. F. İstanbul'daki Rusya Elçiliği. Op. 517 (2). D. 1125. L. 20.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid. L. 34, 70.
- 10 Jerash and Kerak are currently located within the borders of Jordan.
- 11 AVPR. F. Politarhiv. Op. 482. D. 760. L. 18.
- 12 De Proux. LesTcherkesses. // La France Méditerranéene et Africaine. Paris, 1938. Fasc. 4. P. 46.
- 13 Hamidiya was established by Kabardino Circassians n 1903. It was abandoned in time and Arabs settled in the area.
- 14 Sandaniya was established by Chechens, but then Arabs settled here.
- 15 The article of İzzet Aydemir regarding the Syrian Circassians was published on Kafkasya Kültürel Dergi (Vol. 4, Issue:15, 1967).
- 16 AVPR. F. Politarhiv. Op. 482. D. 762. L. 52.
- 17 When the Golan Heights were invaded by Israel in 1967, Circassians living here settled in Damascus and the U.S.
- 18 The borders of present Syria and Jordan which was the province of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century was defined after the World War I. Some of the villages in the aforesaid area are located within Jordan.
- 19 Zakariya Ahmed Vasfi. Ar-rif as-Suri. Daamscus 1957. p. 480-484. (According to the information obtained from Syrian geographer Zakariya Ahmed, 14.161 Circassians lived in Kuneytra and in 12 neighboring villages in mid-1950s.)
- 20 "KÇC Çerkes Kongresi, Suriye Çerkesleri'nin Anayurda Transferi İçin Medvedev'e Çağrıda Bulundu", www.kafkasevi.com, 6 December 2011.
- 21 "Çerkes Kongresi Suriye Adigelerinin Transferini İstedi", www.kafkasevi.com, 4 January 2012.
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Selen Tonkuş Kareem	ORSAM Erbil (Iraq) Representative
Oytun Orhan	ORSAM Researcher, Middle East
Sercan Doğan	ORSAM Research Assistant, Middle East
Nebahat Tanrıverdi	ORSAM Research Assistant, Middle East
Uğur Çil	ORSAM, Middle East
Leyla Melike Koçgündüz	ORSAM, Middle East & Projects
Ufuk Döngel	ORSAM, Ortadoğu
Göknil Erbaş	ORSAM, Black Sea
Aslı Değirmenci	ORSAM, Middle East
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Kamil Erdem Güler	ORSAM Water Research Programme
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